

Policy Analysis

The National Assessment of Courses in Brazil

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Executive summary

In 1996, the Brazilian Ministry of Education introduced a National Assessment of Courses for Brazilian higher education. The assessment consisted of a test applied to all students graduating from specific course programs in the country. The results were published on a five-point scale, from A to E, according to their distribution in each field. In the first year, the test was applied to students who were graduating from the programs with the largest attendance: Law, Administration and Civil Engineering. In 2003, the exam was expected to include 470 thousand students graduating in 26 different fields in 6,500 course programs in the whole country.

The objective of the test was to provide information to the public on the quality of higher education courses, helping the students and their families to choose where to study, and to provide the Ministry of Education with information that could be used in the accreditation and reaccreditation of higher education institutions. Besides, the exam generated an intensive process of discussion and consultations among academics about the contents and standards of the different careers, which supposedly helped to improve the quality of Brazilian higher education throughout.

The exam was introduced without previous consultation, and was received with strong opposition from student associations, teachers' unions and many higher education institutions. However, from the beginning, it received strong support in public opinion and in the press. The criticism ranged from specific objections to the way the tests were conceived and the results presented – a uniform test for the whole country, a national rank of outcomes without consideration of existing conditions and explicit standards – to broad objections to any kind of measurement of education outcomes. However, once in place, the results became widely used by students in their choice of institutions, and by institutions themselves, particularly in the private sector, to publicize their results, or to try to improve them. Bad results, when persistent and associated with other indications of low quality, were supposed to lead to the closing down of the course programs by the education authorities, but, in practice, this has seldom happened.

In 2002 the opposition Laborer's Party won the Presidential Elections and the candidate's program for education announced the end of the National Exam. Once in power, the new Minister of Education established a Commission to examine the issue and to propose a new approach to higher education assessment. The Commission published its conclusions in September 2003 and in December the Government announced his own proposal for higher education assessment, which changes the previous system substantially.

Introduction¹

Brazilian higher education developed late, and was based on the European, mostly French and Italian models. Until the early 19th century, Brazil was a Portuguese colony and no higher education institutions existed. In order to get a degree, one had to go to Coimbra in Portugal or perhaps to France. In 1808 the Portuguese King and his court moved to Brazil, fleeing from the invading Napoleonic troops, and Rio de Janeiro became, for several years, the capital of the Portuguese Empire, to become later an independent country. The first higher education institutions were established in those years – one military academy, later to become a school of engineering; two medical schools; and two law schools. They were all owned, financed, controlled and supervised by the national government. In the late 19th and early 20th century, as the old Brazilian Empire was replaced by a decentralized Republic, other institutions were added. Some states – notably the state of São Paulo – started to create their own institutions, and private institutions began to appear. Until 1889, only 24 higher education schools existed; between 1889 and 1918, 56 new, mostly private, higher education schools were established.² New fields, like pharmacy, dentistry, agriculture, and accounting, were introduced side by side with the old learned professions.

The first universities were established in the 1930s, and they were, mostly, a collection of old schools, or faculties, with one important innovation, a new Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters, which was to be, at the same time, the place for scientific and academic research, and for the preparation of secondary school teachers. The first university, the University of São Paulo, was established by the State government in 1934, and the Universidade do Brasil, now the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, was established in 1939 by the National government. In the early forties, the Catholic Church created the first private university in Rio de Janeiro, and they all introduced course programs in the natural sciences, mathematics, history, geography, social sciences, philosophy, language and literature, which did not exist before.

Throughout the 19th century, holders of higher education degrees strived to assert their exclusive rights to practice their respective professions, and, after the 1930s, the principle that a university degree was tantamount to a professional license became firmly entrenched.³ This created, at once, a problem of regulation, which was never fully solved. To deal with this, a new Ministry of

¹ I am indebted to Gilda Portugal, Maria Helena Guimarães Castro, and, particularly, to Jocimar Archangelo, for the wealth of insight and information on the National Assessment of Courses. I am also grateful to Cláudio de Moura Castro, Jacques Schwartzman and Maria Helena Magalhães Castro for detailed comments and criticisms on the first draft of this paper.

² For the early history of Brazilian higher education, see Fernando de Azevedo, *Brazilian culture; an introduction to the study of culture in Brazil* (New York, 1971), Eunice Ribeiro Durham, "Higher education in Brazil - public and private," in *The Challenges of Education in Brazil*, ed. Colin Brock and Simon Schwartzman (Oxford, UK, forthcoming), Simon Schwartzman, *A space for science the development of the scientific community in Brazil* (University Park, 1991), Anísio Teixeira, *Ensino superior no Brasil: análise e interpretação de sua evolução até 1969* (Rio de Janeiro, 1969).

³ For this evolution, see Edmundo Campos Coelho, *As Profissões imperiais: advocacia, medicina e engenharia no Rio de Janeiro, 1822-1930* (Rio de Janeiro, 1999).

Education was established, together with a National Education Council, formed by public personalities. The new ministry tried to establish a “model university” in the country’s capital, based on a detailed description of the course contents of all disciplines, down to the assignation of textbooks and time tables, which all other institutions had to follow⁴. At the same time, the government created a complex system of professional councils, which, together with the business associations and the trade unions, were supposed to organize the country into a neat and coherent corporatist structure, integrating the professions, the entrepreneurs, the unions and the education institutions.⁵

This tightly conceived system never worked in practice, and its limitations became all too obvious as higher education began to expand and new professions started to emerge after the Second World War. However, the basic assumptions established in the 1930s – that all higher education degrees should be equivalent to a professional certification, that all professions had to be regulated by law, controlled and supervised by a legally established professional council or association, and that it was the role of the Federal government to make sure that all course programs provided equivalent contents – remained and are still in place. The National Education Law of 1996 introduced more flexibility, and the legal requirement that each career should have a national “minimum curriculum” was replaced by more general “curriculum guidelines”.⁶ In a sense, the National Assessment of Courses of the 1990s could be seen as a step backwards in terms of centralization, although, in many cases, there was a genuine effort to limit the assessment to very central skills and competencies, allowing for local experimentation and variations.

The policy problem

In the forties and fifties, the Federal government created a network of Federal Universities. These Federal universities were established usually by the absorption, through legislation, of existing private and state-based institutions, based on political considerations, without any mechanisms of quality assurance. At the same time, new private institutions emerged, first as religious and community based institutions, and later, predominantly, as profit-oriented endeavors. In 1968, there was an important university reform, introducing several innovations taken from the American context – post graduate degrees, the credit system, departments and institutes – with the assumption that all higher education should evolve towards a university model, based on academic research and a full-time academic profession. Simultaneously, however, the government responded to the growing demand for higher education by making it easier for private institutions to open up and offer degrees, without too much control and oversight. By the 1990s, higher education in Brazil had expanded very rapidly. The

⁴ Simon Schwartzman, Helena Maria Bousquet Bomeny, and Vanda Maria Ribeiro Costa, *Tempos de Capanema*, 2 ed. (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, 2000).

⁵ James M Malloy, ed., *Authoritarianism and corporatism in Latin America*, Pitt Latin American series (Pittsburgh, 1977), Phillipe C Schmitter, “Still the century of corporatism?,” in *The new corporatism social-political structures in the Iberian world*, ed. Fredrick B Pike and Thomas Stritch (South Bend, Ind, 1974), Simon Schwartzman, *Bases do autoritarismo brasileiro*, 3a ed., Contribuições em ciências sociais; 10 (Rio de Janeiro, 1988).

⁶ Nina Beatriz Ranieri, *Educação superior, direito e Estado na Lei de Diretrizes e Bases (Lei no. 9.394/96)* (São Paulo, 2000).

number of students doubled in ten years, from 1.5 to more than 3 million, two thirds of them in private institutions. Some of these institutions tried to follow the 1968 model of university organization. Most of them, however, provided just one or a few undergraduate programs, mostly in business administration or law, and relied on part-time lecturers, drawn from the professions or from retired or moonlighting academics from the public sector.

The pressure for and against opening up new institutions and controlling their quality comes from many sides⁷. Brazil's higher education coverage, at about 15% of the 18-24 age cohort, is still very limited, and the social and economic benefits of higher education degrees and the entrance in the learned professions are very high, creating a growing demand for more places. In recent years, the provision of private higher education became a multi-billion dollar business, employing about 200 thousand people, including both academic and administrative personnel.⁸ Side by side with small institutions, there are now very large private universities, with tens of thousands of students in many different locations, with considerable ability to lobby the government and congress for freedom from control and regulation. Opposition to the expansion comes from the professional organizations, particularly in Medicine and Law, who are concerned about the watering down of their professional standards and job market privileges. These concerns are shared by academics and students in public institutions.

Quality assurance is not, however, a problem limited to the private sector. The Brazilian legislation grants full academic autonomy to universities, many of them public, which includes the right to create new course programs and to define the number of students admitted each year. The assumption is that universities are established according to strict academic standards, but in fact public universities can be created by Federal or state legislative acts. In principle, private institutions need to be accredited to get university status and be granted the same autonomy, but, in practice, accreditation has been granted case by case, without any systematic assessment. A new type of institution has been officially recognized in recent years. "University centers" are mostly private institutions, dedicated solely to teaching, presumably of good quality, and have almost the same autonomy as universities⁹. Thus, the authority of the Ministry of Education is limited to approving new universities and university centers in the private sector, and to the minute oversight of non-university institutions, which have to apply for each new course they want to establish, and for the number of students they expect to admit.

The demands for a system of quality assurance, beyond the bureaucratic and ineffective procedures of the Ministry and the National Council of Education, has been clear since at least the Presidential paper on Higher Education of 1985.¹⁰ The paper has led to several initiatives including a

⁷ Simon Schwartzman, *Higher education in Brazil the stakeholders*, LCSHD Paper Series (Washington, DC, 1998).

⁸ Jacques Schwartzman and Simon Schwartzman, "O ensino superior privado como setor econômico," *Ensaio - Avaliação e Políticas Públicas em Educação* 10 (out-dez, 2002).

⁹ By the end of 2003, the Brazilian government issued a Decree that forbids the creation of new university centers, and sets a time limit for their transformation into universities or reversion to non-autonomous status. Brasil Presidência da República, "Dispõe sobre os centros universitários de que trata o art. 11 do Decreto n.º 3.860, de 9 de julho de 2001, e dá outras providências," *Diário Oficial da União*, Dec 12 2003.

¹⁰ Ministério da Educação and Comissão Nacional para a Reformulação da Educação Superior, *Uma nova política para a educação superior brasileira - Relatório Final*, Simon Schwartzman (relator) ed. (Fortaleza, 1985).

program to provide universities with resources for their self-evaluation¹¹ and the establishment of National Commissions of Specialists to define and revise the minimum core curricula of the different careers. In late 1995, under Minister of Education Paulo Renato de Souza, a comprehensive system of assessment of higher education was created. It included the development of a yearly census, to provide quantitative information on the sector by region, state, fields of knowledge and type of institution; qualitative assessments of each institution, large and small, looking at their installations, institutional development plans, research performance and other indicators of quality; and assessment of individual course programs or careers. The assessment consisted of two components. The first component was an assessment of resources, in terms of academic personnel, infrastructure, and internal organization (if they had clearly defined mission, self assessment, and coherent pedagogical projects. This assessment was carried out by peers, who visited each course program to get the information and processed the information according to a pre-defined template. The second component was the National Assessment of Courses—an exam all students had to take before graduation. Post-graduate education (Masters and Doctoral programs) have been subject to a well established assessment procedure which remained in place.¹²

Implementation

The authority for the Ministry of Education to implement the assessment was established by federal law,¹³ which makes it mandatory for students to complete the test if it is applied to their field in their last year of studies, as a precondition for their degrees. This was possible because higher education degrees in Brazil, to be legally valid, have to be registered with the Ministry of Education, usually through the office of a Federal university. However, there is no minimum pass grade for the students, since the goal is to assess the course program, not the student. In the first years, the National Student Union asked their members to boycott the exam, and, in some institutions, the students would just sit without answering the questions. This however led to a low ranking of their course, which reflected badly on their colleagues who did participate, and this practice was abandoned almost completely in the following years.

The National Assessment is implemented by an agency within the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Education Research (INEP), according to a very elaborate procedure.¹⁴ First, an assessment committee is established for each field of knowledge. Members are chosen from lists prepared by professional associations, teaching and scientific associations, and by the Brazilian

¹¹ Ministério da Educação and Secretaria de Educação Superior, Programa de Avaliação Institucional - PAIUB (1997 [cited]); available from http://bve.cibec.inep.gov.br/ac_rap.asp?cat=21&nome=Avaliação%20da%20Educação%20Superior. For a discussion of this program, see Alberto Amaral and Marlis Polidori, "Quality evaluation in Brazil: a competency based approach?," *Higher Education Policy* 12 (1999).

¹² Ministério da Educação, "Avaliação e informação como instrumento de política educacional," in *Educação - Políticas e Resultados* (Brasília, 2002).

¹³ Federal law 9131/95.

¹⁴ See, for a detailed description, INEP, *Provão 2002 - Relatório Síntese - Resumo Técnico* (Brasília, 2002).

Council of Rectors and the Ministry of Education. They should also be representative of Brazil's different regions, and different types of institutions – public and private, large and small. From these lists, the Ministry of Education chooses seven names in each area. Thus, for the year 2002, there were 24 such commissions: Administration, Law, Civil Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Veterinary, Dentistry, Electric Engineering, Journalism, Language and Literature, Mathematics, Economics, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, Agronomy, Biology, Physics, Psychology, Chemistry, Pharmacy, Pedagogy, Architecture, Accounting, Nursing, and History. They meet in Brasilia, and their task is to define the general contents, scope and goals of the assessment of their fields. For their work, the Ministry obtains all course descriptions, pedagogical projects and teaching programs adopted by all institutions in the country, and organizes this material in terms of their goals, objectives, basic bibliography, teaching procedures, and so on, identifying eventual differences in these orientations and goals. The Commissions also use assessment reports from previous years, which are prepared by the Ministry with course coordinators and professors in each field. Based on this information, the Commissions each year revise and improve the guidelines of the previous year, in an interactive and continuous learning process.

Once ready, the guidelines prepared by the Committee are passed on to an external contractor, who has the responsibility of developing the tests, administering them, and tabulating the results. The choice of this external contract is made through open, competitive bids. In practice, two institutions working together, the Fundação Carlos Chagas in São Paulo and Fundação Cesgranrio in Rio de Janeiro, have won all these bids since 1995. They are experienced in administering large-scale assessments, having started with the entrance examinations for public institutions in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. They also recruit academic in the universities to develop the instruments, and persons in different institutions to deliver, control and oversee the exams.

Before the exam, the institutions have to provide a list of all students likely to complete their course programs in the given year. The exam takes place on the same day throughout the country and is widely announced in the press. Observers from professional associations, teaching associations and other entities are regularly invited to be present in the different locations where the exam takes place.

Just before the exam, the students receive from the Ministry of Education a magazine, explaining the purposes of the exam, the description of the procedures, and other materials. The core instrument is a written exam, which can be either a multiple choice test, or open ended questions, or both, according to the Committee's recommendations. The general orientation is to put emphasis on the mastery of key concepts, on the ability to think independently and to apply knowledge to new situations; rote learning and the accumulation of information for its own sake are discouraged. Another instrument is a survey questionnaire, in which the students are asked to provide socioeconomic information on themselves and their families, and their views and perceptions about their course programs. A third instrument is the student's assessment of the assessment – if they like the instrument, if they considered it too easy or too simple, inappropriate, etc.

Multiple-choice tests are marked using optical scan technology and grades are provided after the Commission assesses each item's discrimination, level of difficulty and reliability. For open-ended questions, a sample of the responses is used to develop an assessment protocol, which is then applied to the universe of respondents. The grade that a student receives is based on his or her relative place in the distribution of results for the whole country. According to the mean results of their students, each course program receives a grade from A to E. The students are confidentially informed about their

individual result in a bulletin with information about their relative placement in their class, region and the country. The course's mean score, however, are made public.

There are several follow-ups, besides the establishment of the grades. Immediately after the exam, the correct answers to the questions are made public, so that the students can see what they did right or wrong, and the professionals in the field can assess the quality of the exam. Then the aggregate results of the students' evaluation of the assessment for each course are made available to the course coordinators on the Internet.

The next step is a series of national seminars, for each field of knowledge, to discuss the results of the last exam, with the cooperation of professional associations, course coordinators and universities. In these seminars, the Commissions present the results and their views, complaints are aired, and the officers from INEP in charge of the whole process have an opportunity to hear the views of the academic community and express their perceptions of the whole process.

Meanwhile, the Ministry prepares a series of technical reports about the exam, and also summarizes data from the socioeconomic questionnaire, which provides information on characteristics and attitudes of the students. The technical reports include a synthesis of all the results, reports for each field of knowledge, and individual reports sent to the persons in charge of each course program.

Finally, some research institutions and independent researchers are asked to conduct more in depth analysis of the data, which may be used and disseminated by the Ministry, published as academic papers, or remain as technical reports of limited circulation.¹⁵

Costs

There is no estimation of the total cost of the operation. In 2002, the cost paid to the external contractor was about 36 million reais, or 12 million US dollars. With these resources, the contractor was required to prepare 24 different exams to be applied to 361, 000 students graduating from five thousand course programs in 627 municipalities. The per capita cost was, therefore, one hundred reais, or 33 dollars per student. There are many more course programs in the country, but these 24 account for about 90% of the students graduating in that year. There is no information about the internal costs for the Ministry of Education, which includes travel of the 168 members of the academic commissions to meetings in Brasilia, the time of the staff working in the preparation of the materials for the Commissions to work, the organization of seminars and other events, and contracts with external consultants for the analysis of the data. It is a sizeable effort, but not out of proportion considering that the Ministry of Education spends about five billion reais – 1.6 billion US dollars – a year on higher education alone.

¹⁵ The Center for Studies of Public Opinion of the University of Campinas was commissioned to prepare of these reports, which do not seem to be confidential, but was not widely distributed. See Rachel Meneguello et al., "Relatório Final, Meta 4 - Análise dos dados do Exame Nacional de Cursos -Provão," in *Projeto Estudos Socioeconômicos em Educação* (Campinas, SP, 2002).

Impact

The Brazilian legislation gives to the Minister of Education, with the support of the National Council of Education, the authority to accredit new higher education institutions, and to renew their accreditation periodically. In practice, however, once a higher education institution has been allowed to function, only in extreme cases will it lose its authorization or accreditation, and the process of periodical accreditation and reaccreditation of universities was never fully implemented. The government has intervened in a few private institutions in recent years, but never in a public university, and never because of a negative assessment of their academic quality (in some cases, attempts by the Ministry to close down bad quality courses and institutions were stopped by the judiciary, or by appeals to the National Council of Education). The National Assessment of Courses was meant to provide important information for such decisions, but since the results refer to course programs, and not to whole institutions, they can be at most one element of information in a much broader assessment procedure, which is to be still implemented.

Because of this, the direct contribution of the National Assessment for the regulation of higher education has been minimal. Its indirect impact, however, is considered very important. One such impact was to encourage the students to search for better ranked course programs. According to a study done by the Ministry of Education, the number of new applicants for courses in Administration, Law, Civil Engineering, Chemical Engineering and Dentistry, who received “D” and “E” in the assessment, went from 35 to 18 thousand between 1997 and 2001, while the demand for courses rated “A” increased by 6%. Another finding was that new courses in private institutions, established after the assessment was introduced, tend to be better than many old ones. Thus, both students and academic officers are taking the concepts into account, and changing their behavior. Students look for better course programs and universities work to higher standards.¹⁶

The professional and academic associations in Administration carried out a detailed survey among course coordinators on the impact of the assessment in their institutions.¹⁷ They asked about changes introduced in the course programs in the last three years, and whether these changes were induced by the assessment or not. About 65% of the course programs reported changes in the period, half of which were attributed directly to the national assessment. In general, private institutions reacted more to the assessment than public ones, but the difference is not large – 38 vs 30% of all the course programs in the sample. Not surprisingly, the most frequent innovation was to prepare students for the exam, followed by changes in pedagogical and teaching practices of different kinds. Changes involving investments, infrastructure, and salary raises were much less frequent.

¹⁶ Ministério da Educação and Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais, *Cai demanda por cursos com baixo desempenho no Provão (2002 [cited November 5, 2003])*; available from http://www.inep.gov.br/imprensa/noticias/edusuperior/provao/news02_27.htm.

¹⁷ Conselho Federal de Administração, Associação Nacional de Cursos de Graduação em Administração, and Ad Homines, *Alterações, efeitos e influências do provão de administração na opinião dos coordenadores dos cursos de administração* (Brasília, 2003).

Main changes in administration courses induced by the National Assessment of Courses

	% of coordinators reporting the change
Using question items of the assessment in classroom	82.2
Changing teaching methods	68.3
Changing course contents	66.8
Assessing the students abilities to perform in the exam	61.4
Interdisciplinary work	55.5
Mock assessments	55.5
Improving the library	54.5
Upgrading the teaching staff	52.0
Working to improve the image of the institution	51.5
Improving the use of the library by the students	47.0
Strategic planning	41.1
Marketing	41.1
Hiring new staff	39.1
New multimedia resources	35.6
Internet access	34.7
Teacher training	33.7
Links with firms and business sectors	32.2
Trainee programs for students	32.2
Investments in computers	31.7
Interactions with the community	29.7
More working time for staff	25.7
Better equipment in classrooms	25.3
More fellowships for students	13.4
Higher salaries for academic staff	8.0

The few studies that exist on the socioeconomic characteristics of the students, with the information produced by the exams socioeconomic questionnaire, provide very interesting information, some of it unexpected.¹⁸ In general, achievement has much more to do with the characteristics of the institutions than with the characteristics of the students, and the correlation between socioeconomic status and achievement is not high. Part of the reason is that course programs in the private sector tend to be of lower quality than those in the public sector, but students in the private sector come from families with higher income than those in public institutions. The other reason is that once the students are able to reach higher education, they have already overcome most of the disadvantages that would usually affect their academic performance. There are however important differences in careers choice. The parents of more than half of the students in journalism, law, engineering and medicine have a higher education degree, against less than 20% of those in teaching careers (mathematics, language) and less than 10% of those in pedagogy. There are some differences among public and private institutions, but they are much less significant than those among careers. Finally, detailed regression analysis confirms that achievement depends above all on whether the student is enrolled in a public or private institution, and on factors like age, knowledge of English, hours dedicated to study, work, and

¹⁸ Meneguello et al., "Relatório Final, Meta 4 - Análise dos dados do Exame Nacional de Cursos -Provão.", Helena Sampaio, Fernando Limongi, and Haroldo Torres, *Equidade e heterogeneidade no ensino superior brasileiro* (Brasília, 2000).

whether the student attended public or private secondary education (with best results for those coming from private schools).

One of the most important contributions of the National Assessment, not readily documented but very clear in the minds of those responsible for its implementation, was the opportunity it provided for course coordinators, academics and professional associations to come together in a continuous process of discussion and negotiation about the quality standards of their respective fields. Beyond the efforts of many institutions to “learn the tricks” of the exam to get better grades, there are many stories of institutions looking for help to improve their courses, and others closing down because of the lack of student demand.

Opposition and criticism

From the onset, the National Assessment was received with strong opposition from the National Students Union (UNE) and some public universities. The Student Union asked students to boycott the exam and tried to disrupt its implementation. Both the Student Union and the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro went to Court trying to stop the assessment from taking place. The students argued, among other things, that the assessment would hurt the students from the institutions receiving lower ratings. The eventual shortcomings however were not the responsibility of students, but of the institutions, or the government, which did not provide the institutions with the support they needed. The arguments coming from public universities were similar. If they did not perform well, it was because they were not getting the necessary support, and should not be punished for that. There were other criticisms, from general statements about the impossibility of measuring and quantifying quality, to a principled stand against bringing a market mentality to the realm of culture and education by establishing comparisons and competition among institutions and students,.

These criticisms have to be placed in the Brazilian political context of the time. Both the National Student Union and the higher education teachers’ association were in the opposition to the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government, and strong critics of whatever initiative came from the Ministry of Education, for good or bad reasons. Cardoso, a renowned sociologist and former professor at the University of São Paulo, had a history of strong opposition to the Brazilian military regime that lasted until 1985. He was elected President in 1994 after being able, as Brazil’s economic minister, to bring the country’s inflation under control. His mandate, which lasted until 2002, was characterized by very significant efforts to bring order to the economy and reduce the runaway expenses of the public sector. It was a period of economic stagnation and his government was accused of obeying the neoliberal orientations of the International Monetary Fund. One of the strongholds of the opposition was the organized civil servant unions, which included employees of public universities.¹⁹

Partisan reasons aside, several criticisms to the assessment are reasonable. The adoption of a single, unified exam for all course programs in the country led all the institutions to adjust to the same mold, and may have thwarted their freedom to experiment and to diversify. By selecting a group of

¹⁹ See, on the period, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Mauricio A Font, *Charting a new course the politics of globalization and social transformation* (Lanham, MD, 2001), Mauricio A. Font, *Transforming Brazil : a reform era in perspective* (Lanham, Md., 2003).

specialists to write up the exam, the Ministry made the particular bias of this group the national standard. This policy was consistent with the traditional view that all higher education course programs in a given field should provide the same contents and equivalent professional certifications. In areas with well established academic and professional paradigms this is not controversial. But this is the exception, rather than the rule, in a highly differentiated mass higher education system with different types of students, institutions, and visions about what the contents of higher education should be.

The decision to publicize the rank of each course on the five-point scale, based on the distribution of results, was a conscious choice not to establish clear reference, or cutting points, in relation to which a given course program could be considered acceptable or not acceptable. So, in a field where all course programs are of very good quality, 12% of them would be ranked as “E”, while in another, where all course programs are bad, 12% would receive an “A”²⁰. In other words, all courses are ranked by uniform criteria, and the public is informed about their relative position in the rank, but not if they are of good quality or substandard. The reason for this was never spelled out very clearly, but it is not difficult to understand. The establishment of cutting points would be very controversial, and the official information that many, perhaps the majority, of the course programs in many fields are substandard – a very likely result – would lead to a crisis the Ministry could not possibly handle.

A third criticism is that the assessment may be measuring the cultural capital the students bring to the university, rather than the education value added to them by their courses. Prestigious institutions attracting very good students would have good results even if the courses were bad; hardworking and dedicated institutions accepting students with poor backgrounds would not be able to get higher marks, regardless of their effort. It would be possible to estimate the value added by the courses by taking into account the student’s achievements on their entrance examinations to the university, or their achievements in another national voluntary test, applied to students at the end of secondary school. A statistical analysis using information from the student’s university entrance examinations in the state of Minas Gerais shows that, indeed, previous conditions affect the final outcome, but that, in general, this information would not change the final rankings in the national assessment, except in a few isolated cases.²¹

A fourth criticism was that by looking only at the students’ results, without considering variables related to the academic staff, equipment, computer facilities, library resources, and so on, the National Assessment was at most only a partial assessment instrument. In fact, in addition to the exam, the Ministry of Education developed another assessment procedure for these input variables. A heavy weight was given to the academic degrees of the faculty (the percentage holding doctoral and master degrees) and to the percentage with full time contracts, plus to an assessment of the physical equipment and pedagogical projects. Initially the Ministry ranked the course programs according to a combination of these instruments. The information on inputs is necessary and useful, but there are good reasons not to combine input and output effects on the same scale. It is important to know, for

²⁰ Until 2000, the grades were distributed according to fixed percentages – 12%, 18%, 40%, 18% and 12%, for A, B, C, D, E. Since 2001, the normal distribution was used, with courses above one standard deviation from the mean receiving an A, and those one standard deviation below receiving an E.

²¹ José Francisco Soares, Leandro Molhano Ribeiro, and Cláudio de Moura Castro, “Valor agregado de instituições de ensino superior em Minas Gerais para os cursos de direito, administração e engenharia civil,” *Dados - Revista de Ciências Sociais* 44 (2001, 2001).

instance, which inputs are more effective than others in producing the outcomes. Besides, most lecturers in public institutions are nominally full-time, while most in the private sector are not, and this introduced a bias in favor of public institutions.

The Commission established by the Ministry of Education in 2003 to propose a new national assessment system for higher education in Brazil presented a detailed criticism of the current Course Assessment and suggested a different path. Some of the criticism was technical: the lack of clear standards and the measurement of the educational value added from the courses, and the lack of comparability of results over time. Other criticism was more general: the exams responded to “motivations coming from outside, rather than inside the institutions, leading to isolated distorted and wrong representation of the academic world”, or that “its rationality was much more market oriented (*“mercadológica”*) and regulatory than academic and pedagogic”. Other criticisms were related to the growing cost of the assessments. According to the report, the current costs are likely to grow, as higher education expands and new fields and disciplines are included in the assessment.²²

The new higher education assessment

With the change of government in early 2003, the original team responsible for the establishment and implementation of the National Assessment within the Ministry of Education was disbanded, and most of the institutional memory and experiences accumulated in recent years has already been lost. In 2003, the Ministry of Education went ahead with the implementation of the exam, following the standing legislation, but without carrying on the usual procedures of analyzing the results with the participation of the academic committees. In December of 2003, at last, the government issued a “provisional act”²³ changing the legislation regulating the whole higher education assessment system, while the Ministry of Education issued another document spelling out how it intended to proceed. The provisional act created a new system for the assessment of higher education, based on two new National Commissions, one to provide guidelines and another to implement the new procedures. The members of both commissions are to be nominated by the government. The first commission will consist of persons with recognized competencies and representatives of the “organized civil society” of students, teaching and administrative staff, and the second will consist of civil servants from the Ministry of Education.

The new system is supposed to rank the “institutional quality” of higher education establishments on three levels: satisfactory, regular, and not satisfactory. The existing five-level ranking system disappears and the new ranking will combine the results of four different assessments:

²² Comissão Especial da Avaliação da Educação Superior, Sistema Nacional de Avaliação da Educação Superior SINAES: Bases para uma nova proposta de avaliação da educação superior (2003 [cited September 5, 2003]; available from http://www.funadesp.org.br/downloads/Nova_Proposta.pdf. p. 60.

²³ Brasil Presidência da República, “Medida Provisória 147, de 15 de dezembro de 2003. Institui o Sistema Nacional de Avaliação e Progresso do Ensino Superior e dispõe sobre a avaliação do ensino superior,” *Diário Oficial da União*, December 16 2003. In Brazil, it is possible for the Executive branch to create laws through provisional acts (*“Medidas Provisórias”*) which are valid immediately, but can be changed or rejected by Congress within a short limit of time. This is supposed to be used only on extraordinary situations, but in practice it is used whenever the government wants to avoid the lengthy procedures of sending ordinary bills to be discussed by Congress.

institutional capabilities, teaching, knowledge production processes (presumably research), and social responsibility. In another document the Ministry of Education spelled out the broad outlines of the new assessment it expects to undertake.²⁴ There will be an “Index of Development of Higher Education” (inspired by the Index of Human Development of the United Nations Development Program), which will combine the results of the four assessments. The National Assessment of Courses remains, to assess learning process. But, instead of a yearly universal assessment of all graduating students and course programs in specific fields, the assessments will be done now every three years, through sampling procedures. And, instead of just one assessment, there will be two, one at the beginning, the other at the end of the course program.

The former Minister of Education, Paulo Renato de Souza²⁵, in a press conference, indicated some potential problems, stating that, in practice, the government is shutting the assessment system down. Other observers are also raising questions. By making the participation in the assessment voluntary for the students, the Ministry may not be able to get them to participate; the proposed sampling procedures have not been spelled out; it is not clear how the assessment of a sample of course programs could be combined with the assessment of institutions; it is not clear whether the assessments to be published will refer to course programs or to institutions as a whole, which seems to be the case; the new legislation bypasses the National Council of Education; and the new evaluation committees are likely to represent the existing unions of students, lecturers and civil servants, rather than the academic and professional communities of the country. Finally, by combining the results of the assessment of outputs with three other assessments, supposedly with the same weight, the new procedure is likely to obscure, for society, the main information it wants, the quality of the education provided in specific course programs, which may vary widely within the same institution. In spite of this criticism, the new system is being presented as an important improvement over the past, and it is necessary to wait and see how it will be implemented.

²⁴ Ministério da Educação, *Sistema Nacional de Avaliação e Progresso da Educação Superior: Uma nova sistemática de avaliação do Ensino Superior brasileiro* (2003).

²⁵ Paulo Renato Souza, "Observações sobre a Medida Provisória 147 Sobre o sistema de avaliação do ensino superior," (2003).

The future

The Brazilian National Assessment of Courses is a unique and extraordinary experience, which has generated admiration and interest in higher education circles in different parts of the world, and received strong support in the Brazilian public opinion. Its future, however, is uncertain. On hindsight, it is possible to say that the main weakness of the National Course Exam was its lack of proper institutionalization and the absence of a clear sense of ownership within Brazil's higher education and professional communities. The Exam started as a personal initiative of the Minister of Education, Paulo Renato de Souza (an economist who had been the rector of the University of Campinas and a high ranking officer of the Inter American Development Bank) who had to start by convincing his own staff of its need. Its implementation was assigned to the most flexible and independent branch of the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Education Research (INEP). In principle, other institutions could have taken this task— the Secretary for Higher Education within the Ministry, the National Council of Education, the National Conference of Rectors—and a new institution could have been created for this purpose, like the National Commission for the Assessment and Accreditation of Universities in Argentina.²⁶

Had the Minister decided to work through one of these institutions, subject to all kinds of interest groups and administrative hurdles, or to create a new one, he might not have succeeded in moving so rapidly, and achieving so many significant results in such a short time. Acting on the power of his cabinet and thanks to his personal prestige, it was possible to move quickly through the complex legislative process to get the legal authorization and to place the necessary human and financial resources in the hands of the able head of INEP, Maria Helena Guimarães Castro.

The price, however, was that no institution or segment of the academic community claimed ownership of the Assessment, except a small team within the Ministry of Education. Hundreds of academics were asked to participate in the Commissions and probably did a very important work, but they were there by the Minister's invitation. The statistical data generated by the exams remained under the Ministry's control. Some qualified researchers and research centers were invited to analyze the data, but they were not made publicly available to the academic community of education researchers. In the effort to keep up with the complex procedures established for the Assessment, most of the energy of INEP's staff was dedicated to the preparation of technical documents and other materials for the Commissions, the students and the course program coordinators, with little left for the deeper reflection on the general importance and significance of the Assessment. To conquer public opinion, the Minister had a competent public relation staff, which kept the press well informed about the achievements of the Assessment, and helped to win the battle of the public opinion against the organized opposition.

Without clear ownership in society, and being established as just one initiative within a sector of the Ministry of Education, the National Assessment did not have the strength to survive the change in administration. The new Evaluation Commissions that have been established by the new legislation to implement the new assessment system could be a step in the right direction if these Commissions can become truly independent and autonomous from vested interests. There is little hope for that,

²⁶ Comisión Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación Universitaria (CONEAU).

however, given their proposed membership: representatives of the “organized society” – presumably, unions of students, lecturers and university employees, known to have been the strongest opponents of the National Assessment of Courses as it existed, and functionaries of the Ministry of Education in different capacities.

It is not a promising perspective. To become a stable and significant feature of Brazilian higher education, the Assessment would have to find a permanent institutional house, which can be neither the Ministry of Education, nor the unions and corporations with vested interests against any kind of external assessment of their own work. Between these two extremes, a proper space will have to be found, if the experience of recent years is not to be lost.

Resources for Policy Makers

a) Live Internet links:

Persons willing to learn more about the assessment of higher education in Brazil should consult the sites of the Ministry of Education in Brazil, and more specially those pages related to Higher Education and to the National Institute for Education Statistics (INEP). The site is in Portuguese, and its contents reflect the current activities and views of the Brazilian federal education authorities, and the site of INEP publishes several kinds of statistical information for all levels of education. The sites are:

- Ministry of Education: <http://www.mec.gov.br/>
- Higher Education: <http://www.mec.gov.br/nivemod/educsupe.shtml>
- INEP: <http://www.inep.gov.br/>

b) Technical documents and assessment results

A selection of technical and other official documents, related to the assessments of 2001, 2002 and 2003 can be downloaded from the links below. All texts are in Portuguese.

2003

[Technical report 2003](#) (Adobe file)

[Results 2003](#) (Excel file)

2002

[Technical Report 2002](#) (Adobe file)

[Results, by fields of knowledge 2002](#) (Excel file)

[Results, by State 2002](#) (Excel file)

[Assessment of teaching conditions 2002](#) (html file)

[Model of Course Program Report 2002](#) (Adobe file)

[Model of Student report card 2002](#) (Adobe file)

2001

[Technical report 2001](#) (Adobe file)

[Results 2001 by State](#) (Excel file)

[Model of Course Program report 2001](#) (Adobe file)

[Model of Student report card 2001](#) (Adobe file)

[New grading procedures](#) (Adobe file)

c) Studies, press releases, up to 2002

Castro, Maria Helena Guimarães, [O Exame Nacional de Cursos](#), Apresentação ao Seminário sobre Educação e Empregabilidade, São Paulo, 4 de maio de 2000 (Adobe file)

Conselho Federal de Administração, Associação Nacional de Cursos de Graduação em Administração, and Ad Homines. [Alterações, efeitos e influências do provão de administração na opinião dos coordenadores dos cursos de administração](#). Brasília: Conselho Federal de Administração, 2003. (Adobe file)

Meneguello, Rachel, Fernando Antônio Lourenço, José Roberto Ruz Perez, Plínio Augusto Dentzien, Ana Maria Alves Carneiro Silva, Clécio da Silva Ferreira, Fabíola Brigante Del Porto, Fernando Alves Silva, Janaína de Rezende Barreto, João Henrique Galvão, José Vilton Costa, Paula Vanina Cencig, Rosilene Sydney Gelape, Sérgio Stocco, Simone da Silva Aranha, and Vítor Luiz Cooke Vieira. "Relatório Final, Meta 4 - [Análise dos dados do Exame Nacional de Cursos - Provão](#)." In Projeto Estudos Socioeconômicos em Educação. Campinas, SP: Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Centro de Estudos de Opinião Pública, 2002 (Adobe file)

INEP. "[Alunos apontam melhorias na graduação](#)." Press release. Brasília: Ministério da Educação, Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais, 2002 (Adobe file)

INEP, [Cai demanda por cursos com baixo desempenho no Provão 2002](#). Press release. Brasília: Ministério da Educação, Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais, 2002 (Adobe file)

Ministério da Educação, "[O Ensino Superior: Maior e Melhor](#)." Brasília: Ministério da Educação, 2002 (Adobe file)

Soares, Maria Susana Arrosa, Deninse Leite, Maria Auxiliadora Nicolato, and Clarice E Baeta Neves. "[O sistema de avaliação do ensino superior no Brasil](#)." Paper presented at the Encuentro del Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe y Red Iberoamericana para la Evaluación y la Acreditación de la Calidad de la Educación Superior, Buenos Aires 2003. (Adobe file)

Souza, Paulo Renato. "[Información y evaluación como instrumentos de política educacional](#)." Estudio de Casos preparado para el INDES/BID, basado en la experiencia del Ministerio de Educación del Brasil en el período 1995-2002. Versión revisada atendiendo a las observaciones del INDES., 2002.

d) The new assessment system, 2003

Ministério de Educação, Assessoria de Comunicação Social - [Ministro recebe proposta de mudança na avaliação do ensino superior](#). SESU, Setembro de 2003 (htm file)

Ministério da Educação, Assessoria de Comunicação Social. [Sistema Nacional de Avaliação e Progresso da Educação Superior: Uma nova sistemática de avaliação do Ensino Superior brasileiro](#), 2003. (Adobe file)

Presidência da República, [Medida Provisória 147](#), de 15 de dezembro de 2003. Institui o Sistema Nacional de Avaliação e Progresso do Ensino Superior e dispõe sobre a avaliação do ensino superior. (Adobe file)

Souza, Paulo Renato. "[Observações sobre a Medida Provisória 147 Sobre o sistema de avaliação do ensino superior](#)." (Adobe file)

e) Printed materials available from the Public Policy for Academic Quality Research Program (PPAQ), Abernethy Hall, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Eugênia M. R. Charnet and Maria M. Okuda, Avaliação das Provas ENC/2002. Relatório, by INEP, Um Estudo sobre o Processo e os Resultados, 2002
INEP, Manual de Avaliação Institucional, Centros Universitários, August, 2002
INEP, Manual do Avaliador Institucional, 2002
INEP, Manual de Avaliação do Curso de Farmacia (2002)
INEP, Manual para Elaboração das Provas, 2003
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